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No Limits: Houston rolls out an image campaign targeting young professionals



HOUSTON

THE CITY WITH NO LIMITS

Greater Houston Partnership

Logo for new city image campaign sponsored by the Greater Houston Partnership. The slogan is "Houston: The City With No Limits."

Alex Tonelli, a 2011 graduate of the Stanford Graduate School of Business and a San Francisco entrepreneur, has never visited Houston. But he has impressions: Extreme heat, strip clubs, NASA and an oil-dominated economy.

His friends who have moved here have positive things to say, Tonelli added. But for the most part, among his peers, "Houston is not a commonly mentioned place where people consider moving."

Well aware of such attitudes, the Greater Houston Partnership on Tuesday launched – to fanfare that included a three-minute video featuring everything from an astronaut bouncing on the moon to musicians rocking at the local House of Blues – a new image campaign designed to highlight some of the city's amenities, from parks and museums to restaurants and the Galleria.

The campaign slogan, "Houston: The City With No Limits" also was unveiled to civic leaders and media gathered at NRG Stadium.

The image campaign will include television spots that reflect Houston's upbeat spirit, diversity of opportunity and fun atmosphere, said Bob Harvey, president and CEO of the Greater Houston Partnership.

TV spots will run locally this year, and Harvey said the campaign will go worldwide next year.

Around \$12 million will be spent over the next five or six years, either on marketing the city through the image campaign or targeting degreed young professionals. Starting next year the Greater Houston Partnership will visit college campuses, Harvey said.

Many outsiders consider Houston a good place to find work, but may not think of it as a great place to live, said Jamey Rootes, president of the Houston Texans and chairman of the Greater Houston Partnership's image campaign.

Misperceptions about the quality of life in Houston impede the city's ability to attract new companies and young professional talent, Rootes said. He wouldn't name names or give dollar amounts, but he said specific opportunities have been lost in recent years.

As part of its research, the partnership surveyed a number of corporate executives who had negative impressions of Houston. Harvey said many of them had never visited the city.

In some instances, their impressions had been shaped by their perceptions of Texas politics, Harvey said. People seemed unaware of Houston's diversity both in public opinion and cultural life.

"We're calling it a 'campaign,' but what we're really trying to do is put a new brand image of the city in people's minds," Harvey said. "And if it's grounded in reality it should stand the test of time, and you don't need to change it every few years."

The partnership was joined on the image campaign task force by the Greater Houston Convention & Visitor's Bureau, the city of Houston and Houston First Corp., Harvey said.

MMI Agency of Houston and Avalanche Consulting of Austin created the campaign, Harvey said.

Cindy Marion, president and CEO of MMI Agency, said the slogan can take on a variety of meanings, one being that the city offers unlimited opportunities for people and is a place where there are so many things to do.

Tonelli, the Stanford grad, said the No Limits slogan, "makes me think of the fact that there are no zoning restrictions, which seems like the city is open minded."

The campaign seemed to resonate with several local 20-somethings who work downtown.

For Maria Tores, 23, coming out of the Chase building, the slogan has "a freedom vibe" and can also be applied to the city's diverse population.

"It's not just one culture or race that they're specifying," she said. "Everyone's included."

Jesse Wilson, 29, finds the "opportunities are endless in this city because it's so diverse." He summed his feelings up as, "I couldn't ask for a better city to live in."

And Everett Muzzy, 21, acknowledged that while "economic reasons" are a major draw, "there's also a booming culture and a whole culinary culture, which is good for me."

The city has run a number of image campaigns over the years, with slogans such as "Houston Proud," "Expect the Unexpected" and "Houston is Hot." There also is the unofficial "Houston, It's Worth It" campaign.

An effective image campaign must first of all communicate a message that is true, said George Haley, director of the Center for Industry Competitiveness at the University of New Haven. If not, he said, "word of mouth will kill it, especially with the Internet."

Since "The City With No Limits" can convey a variety of meanings, Haley said the campaign will sink or swim with the visual images used in the ads.

Haley, who once lived in Houston, agreed that many people who have never visited are unaware of its cultural diversity and amenities.

The Houston Proud campaign of the mid-1980s, was meant to lift the spirits of Houstonians during an economic slump, Harvey said. He said some of the other campaigns were clever but he wasn't always sure what they intended to accomplish.

The Greater Houston Convention & Visitors Bureau has two active campaigns, "My Houston," featuring Houston-born celebrities touting the city, and "Houston Is ...," spotlighting local chefs, artists and others who are making their mark on the city.

Both have been successful in promoting the Houston brand, said visitors bureau spokesman A.J. Mistretta.

While the bureau targets conventions and tourists, the partnership's campaign is designed to get professionals to move here, Harvey said.

Cody Bryant, a Rice graduate who moved to Houston from Longview for school and now works downtown, suggested something else might help the city's image.

"I like it here OK, but I hate the traffic," he said. "It's nice that there's a lot to do and on any given night you can find something to do."